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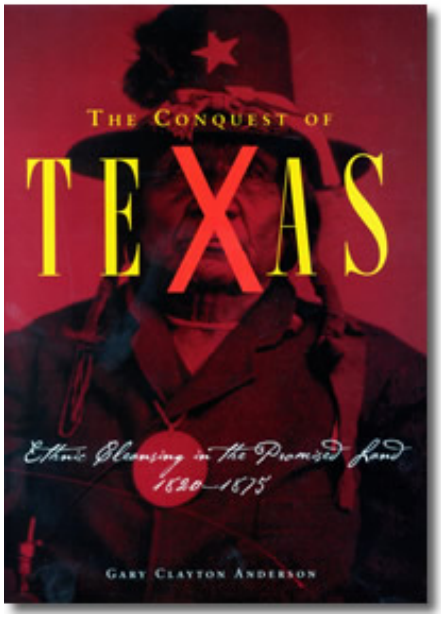

The Conquest of Texas: Ethnic Cleansing in the Promised Land

By Gary Clayton Anderson

Review by Byron Johnson

Gary Clayton Anderson, *The Conquest of Texas: Ethnic Cleansing in the Promised Land* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005). 494 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 0-8061-3698-7. $29.95 Hardcover only.

The Conquest of Texas is trumpeted as a groundbreaking study of multicultural relations in early Texas. Unfortunately, as its lurid cover and glib dust jacket copy signify, it is an attempt to create a controversial and commercial book by interpreting well-known sources of Texas History with extreme bias. It might be understandable if this were a book published by a commercial press. However, it is hard to understand how reviewers at the prestigious University of Oklahoma Press accepted it for publication.

Anderson's flawed premise is that the Indian perspective on early Texas history has never truly been appreciated or studied. In reality, historians and anthropologists have delved into Texas Indian history, culture, linguistics and prehistory for more than fifty years. Even the 4th and 7th grade Texas public schools curricula now incorporate units on Texas Indians.

Anderson seems—or chooses to be—unaware of this. For almost 500 pages he flogs this dead horse with caustic comments, stereotypes every ethnic group in early Texas and oversimplifies complex historical events. He references the traditional published sources and archives at the University of Texas and the Texas State Library and Archives. However, there is little evidence that he consulted contemporary scholars engaged in research into the ethnic and cultural heritage of Texas.

When I was sent this book for review, I was immediately struck by the incompatible and sarcastic subtitle *Ethnic Cleansing in the Promised Land*. The inflammatory dust jacket copy praises Anderson's "new" perspective. Yet, in spite of his publisher's praise, the work falls flat because it repeatedly violates two basic principals of historical research taught to freshman history and anthropology students:

> ***(1) Avoid interpreting other cultures—or historical events—from the perspectives and biases of your own culture and time.***

(2) Approach research with theories, not with already formulated conclusions.

In reviewing this book I was painfully reminded of Eric Von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods* in which he ignored both principles to create sales and controversy.

Von Daniken's bestseller assumed that early civilizations such as the Mayans, Egyptians and Inca were far too primitive to discover principles of advanced mathematics, astronomy, medicine and engineering. Instead, the author envisioned benevolent alien astronauts intervening to put humanity on the right track. Through their tutelage, we lowly humans were able to build the pyramids, develop the calendar and explore science.

Von Daniken's methodology was simple; he sought archaeological, artistic and historical evidence that fit his preexisting theory. He oversimplified and ignored alternative interpretations and conflicting facts. And he viewed everything from his 1960s space-race perspective.

***The Conquest of Texas* commits precisely these same errors. Anderson selects only those historical sources that uphold his primary thesis—that Anglo-Europeans and Tejanos engaged in an organized conspiracy to drive Indians from Texas or to exterminate them. In so doing he creates both a pan-Indian perspective that never existed and creates an extensive and well-organized anti-Indian conspiracy.**

Anderson supports his conclusions with long outdated sources, such as Wilbarger's *Indian Depredations in Texas*. Many of these sources are well known to have significant errors and to have embellished historical events. The author amplifies these problems by making wholly unsupported statements—for example, that Indian deaths at the hands of non-Indians far exceeded what was reported at the time. He never considers that, like Vietnam War enemy casualty reports, the figures might have been purposefully inflated as well as under-reported.

The historical "sins" found throughout the book make a good object lesson on what to avoid for students of history and anthropology.

(1) Racial stereotyping and "Texas phobia" abound from the dust jacket to the final page of text.

(2) The author introduces historically incompatible modern concepts not applicable to the era such as "ethnic cleansing" and "concentration camps."

(3) Key facts are selectively omitted such as the participation of minorities in the Texas Rangers.

(4) The author continually oversimplifies the complex events and political environment of the era.

The racial and geographical stereotyping of Indians and non-Indians is overwhelming—and often offensive. The dust jacket blithely states "*Any Texan will tell you, they are quick in defense of their honor.*" Were that insulting "shoot first" stereotype true, Dr. Anderson would be in trouble from many quarters.

Anderson describes German ranchers and farmers spreading into arable land with disturbing imagery recalling a *blitzkrieg*. The diverse Mexican politicians

who led Independence from Spain are labeled "Creole liberals." Indians are—unbelievably— called "noble savages," while Anderson declares with glee that "Anglos" were "savage nobles."

I almost put the book down at that point.

Oversimplification and lumping together of diverse groups persists throughout the book. The term "Anglos," is applied to all who are not Indians or Hispanics. Perhaps a trip to the Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio would have been in order to understand ethnic diversity and immigration in early Texas.

In one memorable section Anderson declares the leaders of early Texas to be "*all male, all white, and all heroes in a society that worships heroes.*" Somehow he has missed the last 30 years or so of study directed at individuals like Juan Seguin and José Antonio Navarro. He states that Tejanos were "ambivalent" about Texas Independence—even though studies show that as many as one-third of those who fought for Texas Independence were Tejanos. Yes, even the sometimes maligned Daughters of the Republic of Texas include Tejano members and embrace their contributions in the defense of the Alamo and Texas Independence.

But then Anderson also reduces the complex and multifaceted Texas Revolution to a "*poorly conceived southern land grab that almost failed*."

The Indians, whose story Anderson purports to tell, are treated just as stereotypically as non-Indians. They are largely depicted as homogeneous in culture and suffering from problems not of their own making.

> ***To be sure, the Texas tribes had experienced many evolutionary changes. The indigenous tribes* [my underline]—*Jumanos, Coahuiltecans, Tonkawas, Karankawas, Apaches and Caddos—had faced decline and in some cases near extinction.***

The sanitized "evolutionary changes" Anderson glosses over often consisted of bloody intertribal warfare. Indians were responsible for the decline and attempted extermination of other Indians. While there is a reference to the repulsive bounty on Apache scalps in West Texas, I could find no reference to the organized expulsion and near annihilation of Apache bands by the Comanche in the 1720s.

Anderson gives amazingly short shrift to the strength of Indian land claims. This is odd for a work that centers on land rights and the displacement of various groups by other groups. The history of Texas—and in fact Mexico, Spain and every other corner of the earth—is the history of one group displacing another. How "indigenous" is defined is an interesting discussion that this book never undertakes. Anderson apparently regards Indian land claims as preeminent, even if those groups were relatively recent immigrants.

For example, Anderson declares as "indigenous" Apaches who were part of waves of Athabascan migrations from the northwest. He deems the Caddo to be native although they migrated into what is now Texas from Louisiana and the east. The Coahuiltecans immigrated from what is now northern Mexico. And even the Comanche, who are perhaps the best-known "Texas" Indians, did not appear in Texas in any significant numbers until the 18th century.

A significant portion of the book is devoted to a flawed critique of relations

between Anglo-Europeans, Tejanos, the Comanche and their sometimes allies the Kiowa. The author displays little understanding of Comanche history and culture, their raid-or-trade economy and its origin, their complex politics or their relations with other groups such as New Mexican Comancheros.

In actuality, Comanche dominance over portions of what is now Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Texas was wrested, often brutally, from other tribes long after the arrival of the Spanish. While there is much in Comanche culture to respect, they displaced almost as many indigenous groups as Anglo-Europeans. All of this is well documented in many sources including Charles Kenner's excellent *A History of New Mexican-Plains Indian Relations*.

The Texas Rangers receive special treatment from Anderson. They are characterized as an out-of-control and bloodthirsty militia who had no redeeming qualities. It is old news that the early Rangers committed both acts of heroism and acts of barbarity on a brutal frontier. However, Anderson's description of the Texas Rangers as unrelenting and merciless killers is both inaccurate and a disservice to history.

The primary sources for Anderson's perspective on the Texas Rangers appear to be negative U.S. Army correspondence and reports dating from the Mexican and Indian wars. Staid Army officers were usually appalled by the Texas Rangers' loose chain of command, lack of discipline and all-or-nothing style of battle. The Rangers and the Army rarely played well together. Understanding this history is crucial to gaining insight into the many and varied opinions of the Rangers during this era.

At the outbreak of the Mexican War, the U.S. Army suffered several near-catastrophic losses to the well trained and equipped Mexican Army. There were few combat veterans among the ranks of the "gringos." Those who had any combat experience gained it in the Seminole Indian Wars against an elusive foe who fought in Vietnam-style guerrilla engagements. Tropical and other diseases accounted for more casualties than did the Seminoles. This was a far cry from the battlefields of arid Mexico fighting against one of the best armies in the world.

The U.S. Army was rescued by the likes of Rangers John Coffee Hays and Sam Walker who joined up as U.S. Volunteers. This "highly irregular" cavalry volunteered after pleas by the U.S. Government to the Governor of Texas. Rangers understood the "no quarter" reality of such warfare—and that the Mexican Army martial air *Deguello* had a meaning beyond that of a soulful military tune.

Owing the Texas Rangers did not engender respect from the Army. Especially when the Rangers became some of the first media celebrities in the newspaper dispatches of the time. As a result, military reports were seldom kind. Professional Army careers were not advanced by indebtedness to citizen-militias. This is a bias which continued well into the modern era.

One of the most glaring omissions in Anderson's work is his ignorance of the multicultural makeup of the early Texas Ranger service. He is apparently unaware that Tejanos and Native Americans served in the Texas Rangers in all ranks from private to captain. Sam Houston even eulogized a Lipan Apache Captain of the Rangers, Flacco, for his service to the Republic and his people.

In the end, *The Conquest of Texas* is not a pioneering work. It fails to support the theories of a unified pan-Indian perspective or the existence of an

organized anti-Indian conspiracy among the many disparate groups in early Texas tantamount to "ethnic cleansing."

History is the understanding of the relationships and forces that brought us to where we are today. Historians go awry when they judge events according to modern perspectives or construct organized conspiracies that never existed.

Byron A. Johnson is the Director of the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum. He holds degrees in Anthropology, Museum Administration and Western History. He taught Pueblo Indian-Plains Indian history at the University of New Mexico and has served as a consultant for various exhibits on Native American history and prehistory.

The Hall of Fame and Museum complex is located adjacent to Interstate 35 in Waco, Texas (midway between Dallas/Fort Worth and Austin).